

# Lewis and Clark Winter on River Dubois

By Dr. Charles E. White and LTC Mark J. Reardon

It was Dec. 11, 1803, and although the expedition had successfully traveled the distance between Pittsburgh, Pa., and St. Louis, Mo., CPT Meriwether Lewis knew the most challenging part of the journey was yet to come.

Accordingly, Lewis planned to fully utilize the winter of 1803 to make the final necessary arrangements, refine and test load plans for the expedition's three watercraft, and to mold the officers and men into a cohesive group capable of withstanding great hardships.

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Rather than spend the winter at one of the nearby frontier forts, Lewis tasked his co-commander, CPT William Clark, to have the men build their own camp. Lewis viewed the project as an opportunity to gain valuable experience that would later serve the expedition well. Additionally, the project would allow him to judge which men were most proficient with woodworking tools and masonry — skills that would prove useful when expedition participants began living off the land after leaving Missouri.

In accordance with Lewis's instructions, Clark took the party upriver about 18 miles to the mouth of the Wood River, a small stream that flowed into the Mississippi River directly across from the mouth of the Missouri River.



▶ Narrow and deep, the keelboat used during the expedition was intended to carry large amounts of supplies and equipment along uncharted waterways.

▶ Rather than spend the winter at one of the nearby frontier forts, Lewis tasked his co-commander, CPT William Clark, to have the men build Camp River Dubois, which was completed by Dec. 24, 1803.



There, Clark and the men constructed Camp River Dubois, which was finished by Christmas Eve 1803.

Once the winter camp was completed, Clark shifted his emphasis to carrying out a rigorous program of individual and unit training. With Clark taking care of training, Lewis was free to collect supplies from local merchants and gather additional information about the region the explorers would cross during their journey to the Pacific Ocean.

Over the winter months Clark molded the men into a smoothly

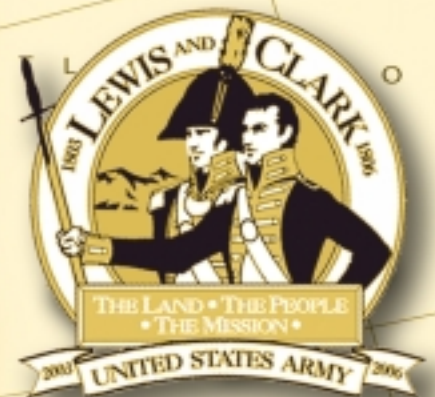
functioning team, employing a daily regimen of close-order drill, equipment inspections and marksmanship training. The latter skill was especially important, since the expedition's survival would depend on its members' ability to hunt for food to supplement their rations.

In order to develop a competitive spirit, Clark held occasional contests among the volunteers and against local traders to determine who was the best shot.

When the men weren't busy conducting individual and unit training, Clark focused their efforts on preparing their watercraft for the journey. With the help



The first time Lewis and Clark met Sacagawea was in November 1804, when she helped her husband deliver buffalo robes to the explorers at Fort Mandan.







Lewis barely escaped death on May 23, 1804, when he slipped while exploring the area above Tavern Cave. He saved himself by using his knife to halt his slide.

of river men from Cahokia, Clark and his Soldiers modified and armed the keelboat and two smaller pirogues, waterproofed and packed supplies, loaded and reloaded the boats until they were considered “seaworthy” and then rehearsed maneuvering them on the river while fully loaded.

Discipline was strict, as Clark focused on ensuring his Soldiers knew by heart how to perform critical mission-related tasks on both land and water.

Daily inspections by the noncommissioned officers kept the camp clean, neat and orderly, and ensured

that the men took proper care of themselves, their weapons and their assigned equipment. Clark dealt firmly with any form of insubordination or misbehavior. At the same time, he rewarded the winners of marksmanship contests and those who distinguished themselves on their work details.

His approach to unit discipline proved effective, as only five minor infractions were recorded during the expedition’s two-and-a-half-year trek to the Pacific Ocean, a record unmatched by any other Army unit of the time.



SGT John Ordway and the expedition’s other NCOs made daily journal entries that have become a priceless record of the westward trek.

Overseeing preparations for the next leg of the expedition consumed much of Lewis’s personal time. He spent days coordinating the acquisition of information and goods from the merchants of St. Louis and nearby Cahokia.

Since Clark often accompanied Lewis on his trips, SGT John Ordway, the expedition’s senior NCO, frequently found himself in charge of Camp River Dubois for days on end. After initially testing his authority, the men came to respect and admire Ordway, demonstrating that the expedition’s NCOs were worthy of the trust placed in them by Lewis and Clark.

In turn, both captains supported their NCOs by firmly dealing with any form of insubordination or



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misbehavior, especially when it was directed against a sergeant or corporal. The first time this occurred, Lewis admonished the recruits and pointed out the importance of NCOs in the chain of command. He informed the men that he and Clark would be derelict in their own duties if they were “to communicate our orders in person” to every member of the expedition.

Lewis was constantly interested in identifying which Soldiers possessed critical skills and encouraging them to further develop their talents. Besides devoting his own efforts to making preparations for the expedition’s departure in the spring, Lewis planned to use the period spent in winter quarters to test the leadership skills of his NCOs. He knew that he might have to split Soldiers of the expedition into smaller independent groups, in order to accomplish numerous missions simultaneously.

On March 31, 1804, Lewis and Clark held a solemn ceremony to enlist the men they had selected as members of “the Detachment destined for the Expedition through the interior of the Continent of North America.”

In addition to the 11 men previously selected, Lewis and Clark chose Ordway, CPL Richard Warfington, and PVTs Patrick Gass, John Boley, John Collins, John Dame, Robert Frazer, Silas Goodrich, Hugh Hall, Thomas Howard, Hugh McNeal, John Potts, Moses Reed, John Robertson, John Thompson, Ebenezer Tuttle, Peter Weiser, William Werner, Isaac White, Alexander Willard and Richard Windsor.

In their mission orders of April 1, 1804, Lewis and Clark divided the men into three squads led by Ordway and SGTs Nathaniel Pryor and Charles Floyd. Another group of five Soldiers, led by Warfington, would accompany the expedition to its winter quarters



and then return to St. Louis in 1805 with communiqués and specimens collected thus far.

The intense training program and extensive logistical preparations paid off on May 14, 1804, when the keel-boat and both pirogues of the expedition cast off to the cheers of crowds lining the banks of the Missouri River.

The Soldiers, clad in their best uniforms, waved back to the admiring throngs. The faces of the spectators clearly displayed the thrill many felt at the prospects that the expedition would help to expand commerce and enhance international prestige.

Members of the expedition experienced a different sense of excitement, a keen sense of anticipation at the prospect of embarking on a journey of unknown duration in unexplored lands. 🚩



Members of the expedition prepare to move out on yet another day’s march after spending the night at a campsite on the Moreau River.

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